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TAGS: [OREP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: SENATOR WEBB PROMOTES ARVN RECONCILIATION AND CONTINUED
ECONOMIC GROWTH DURING DECEMBER VISIT

REF: 08 Hanoi 1408

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[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary: During his December 29-31 visit to HCMC, Senator Jim Webb focused on helping to heal Vietnam's war legacy issues as well as engaging with U.S. and Vietnamese business community on the city's economic future. Visits to both a former ARVN cemetery and an NLF-PAVN cemetery fulfilled a long-term goal for the Senator, who has been engaged in trying to move the reconciliation process forward for all of Vietnam's former veterans for many decades. Meetings with HCMC officials, AmCham, rising young Vietnamese stars in the private sector, and the land development visionaries at Phu My Hung also gave the Senator a chance to discuss ways the U.S. and Vietnam are working together to build a better future here. End summary.

Reconciling the Past

[¶2.](#) (SBU) While the GVN has made significant progress in moving beyond the painful war wounds of the past, one area remaining problematic is the status of former ARVN soldiers and others associated with the former regime. Senator Webb raised this issue during his official meetings with HCMC People's Committee Chairman Le Hoang Quan and Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai, and expressed his appreciation for GVN efforts to allow him to visit a former ARVN cemetery as well as a cemetery for NLF and PAVN soldiers on December 29. The visit to the ARVN cemetery, which was billed by the GVN as a "private visit" (no GVN officials present) granted on the basis of Webb's personal interest, was also the first time Consulate officers have been allowed to visit since early 2007.

A Tale of Two Cemeteries

[¶3.](#) (SBU) The former ARVN cemetery in neighboring Binh Duong province was converted to a civilian cemetery in November 2006 and re-named Binh An Cemetery. Provincial authorities took over management of the cemetery in June 2007. Established in 1965, the cemetery was formerly the national military cemetery for South Vietnam and designed to accommodate 30,000 graves. South Vietnamese records estimated about 16,000 graves in the cemetery by April 30, 1975, half with cement tombstones and half without. Today, there are approximately 12,000 graves in various conditions on 58 hectares of land. The Prime Minister's order allowing civilian access in 2006 gave many families access to repair dilapidated and damaged tombstones, and it was clear during Senator Webb's visit that several tombs had been cleaned, repaired or replaced. A small 'mom and pop' business has also been set up at the entrance, offering to tend graves for families that live far away and cannot visit regularly as well as to locate graves for visiting family members. Grass and underbrush around the graves appeared recently cut and cleared.

14. (SBU) Some graves had faded white tombstones while others were little more than dirt mounds with a single brick placed as a marker. Many looked as though they had remained untouched since 1975. Crumbling monuments and outbuildings stood at the center of the cemetery and pathways were primarily dirt and gravel. Outside the gates, residences and small businesses have encroached on former cemetery grounds, and the pillars and stairs that used to mark the former cemetery entrance have been completely overtaken by trees and foliage. A few grazing cows wandered through as Senator Webb and Consulate staff explored the former hilltop shrine. A group of approximately six men, some of whom worked at the cemetery and some of whom appeared to be plainclothes security escorts, trailed behind the delegation throughout the visit but did not interfere.

15. (SBU) The immaculate grounds and massive monuments of the Ho Chi Minh City Martyr's cemetery in the Binh Hoa district of HCMC stood in stark contrast to conditions at the former ARVN cemetery. Established in 1977, the GVN cemetery was initially for soldiers who fought during the French and American wars, but later became home to fallen soldiers from the Cambodian war as well. The cemetery now has 14,000 graves of soldiers from all 64 of Vietnam's provinces on 29 hectares of land and is administered by the HCMC Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA).

Looking Toward the Future

16. (SBU) During his meetings with HCMC leaders on December 30, Senator Webb noted that while he learned a great deal about "one small place" in Vietnam during his tour of duty as a Marine in Quang Nam and Danang, he has dedicated the past few decades to returning to Vietnam to learn more about the country's culture and history. In the process, Webb said, he has witnessed the amazing growth and energy characterizing Vietnam's rapid economic recovery. He was pleased to report that on this visit, his meeting with the Archbishop and seeing the large crowds of

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Catholic followers attending Midnight Mass in Hanoi, as well as his visit to the former ARVN cemetery, pointed to continued growth in other areas. Senator Webb noted that when he visited HCMC in the 1990's, the park across from the New World Hotel was filled with homeless ARVN soldiers begging for change. This time, the park thronged with revelers celebrating Vietnam's victory over Thailand in the AFF Suzuki Cup soccer match. Relating the status of ARVN soldiers to that of former Confederate soldiers during the American Civil War, Webb noted that it took a very long time for America to resolve internal conflicts and finally recognize the sacrifices of Confederate soldiers from the South.

17. (SBU) While steering clear of any direct discussion of former ARVN soldiers, both Party Secretary Hai and People's Committee Chairman Quan both acknowledged the positive role the U.S. has played in Vietnam's economic growth and recovery, as well as the important strides both countries are making to build bridges for overseas Vietnamese returning to do business today. Quan echoed points raised by Hanoi GVN officials when asking for the Senator's support in current GSP negotiations as well as enhanced educational cooperation.

HCMC's Business Community

18. (SBU) The HCMC AmCham Board of Governors received a sympathetic hearing from Senator Webb with regards to the USG's tax policy on overseas income. He acknowledged that because the U.S. taxes overseas earned income much more highly than do competitor nations (Australia, France, Germany, Britain, etc.), current U.S. tax laws serve to create an unequal playing field in which multi-national corporations must pay a significantly higher total compensation package to Americans in order to yield the exact same take-home pay. Senator Webb likened the situation of American expat executives to that of U.S. autoworkers, noting a major difficulty in negotiating the loan package for U.S. automakers was the popular perception that

union autoworkers are much more highly paid than non-union workers. In reality, he added, the real difference in the total cost of the union and nonunion workforce lies not in salary levels but in the overhead cost of paying benefits to retirees. Webb encouraged AmCham to find other members of Congress who shared his point of view that this tax inequality needs to be rectified and agreed to help "find the right people" in Washington to move the issue. Webb also supported the Chamber's efforts to engage with the GVN on increased transparency, improved labor and association laws and anti-corruption, noting he was active in discussions with GVN leaders visiting Washington on the same topics, especially on labor issues. The Senator showed great interest in Vietnam's energy issues, noting he was active in discussions regarding China's rise in Asia and concerned about reports that China was "arm-twisting" U.S. companies not to do business with Vietnam because of the ongoing dispute in the oil-rich South China Sea.

¶9. (SBU) Several members of the Vietnamese-American MBA Association (VAMBA) and other young Vietnamese business leaders turned out to meet Senator Webb on December 30 and shared with the Senator how their experiences studying and working in the U.S. and Australia have helped them succeed in the private sector back in Vietnam. The Senator commended the group for their important role in building bridges between the U.S. and Vietnam. During his tour of the Thanh Thuan Export Processing Zone and residential developments at Phylly My Hung, Taiwan developer Albert Ting also shared with Senator Webb his company's role in moving HCMC urban planning to a new phase of development, while remaining dedicated to supporting the larger community through its innovative education and energy initiatives.

¶10. (SBU) Senator Webb declined the opportunity to clear on this cable.
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